

BASIC STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR DIFFICULT ASSIGNMENTS:

Notes for Staff Assigned to War Zones and Emergencies

When starting a challenging work assignment, particularly in areas ravaged by war or the threat of hostilities, it is important to be aware that stress will be present at all states of the work. An active war zone exposes everyone involved to traumatic, distressing sights, sounds and situations. The spectacle of death and destruction, the suffering of survivors, and the intense pressure surrounding day-to-day activities both on the job and off takes its toll.

Experienced humanitarian workers offer the following suggestions to ease passage through the assignment experience.

Brief Yourself

- ask for information on the situation and what is most difficult, dangerous and disturbing about the work and living conditions
- determine the amount of self sufficiency necessary so you can obtain equipment and supplies to maintain yourself
- find an experienced mentor for the settling in period
- obtain a country and location-specific-security briefing

Use Reliable Strategies to Cope in Difficult Circumstances

- compartmentalize; focus on the task at hand
- adopt a 'small tasks, small goals' or "one day (or hour) at a time" approach
- monitor inner "self talk", avoid negative comments to yourself, use self encouragement
- work in pairs with a "buddy agreement" to keep an eye on each other
- adhere to regular shifts and breaks for water, food and rest
- know your personal signs of stress and exhaustion
- agree to periodic leave away from work site

Remember Stress Survival Skills

- use portable forms of exercise, i.e. calisthenics, jump rope, stair stepping
- practice simple relaxation techniques; deep breathing, stretching
- pay attention to nutrition; take care with alcohol, caffeine, sugar
- develop and use a repertoire of comforting time-out activities that change your focus (books, music, games)

Recognize Critical Events

Sudden, violent occurrences that present a threat to personal safety and assault one's sense of security and predictability in life are sometimes **Critical Events**.

Examples include:

- witnessing the death or serious injury of another human being
- involvement in an actual or potentially life threatening situation
- injury or death of a co-worker in the line of duty
- dealing with serious injuries and/or deaths of children
- exposure to mass casualties
- involvement with any event described as an atrocity

Such event cause stress reactions which are less disturbing with the knowledge that they are normal responses to an abnormal event. If your work involves possible exposure to critical events, you may find it helpful to be aware of what you or others might experience in the period following the event

What you may experience:

- a periodic feeling of unreality; events seeming dream-like
- heightened response to loud noises, reminders of the event scene, or any other surprises
- discomfort at being alone
- discomfort being in a group
- difficulty concentrating on what to do next
- difficulty making decisions and thinking creatively
- difficulty relating to those who were not part of the event
- difficulty resting and sleeping, fear of nightmares
- increase or decrease in appetite
- discomfort being in places that seem unsafe to you
- feeling vulnerable, afraid of losing control
- feeling frightened, sad, angry, irritable, confused
- feeling and being exhausted

Manage Critical Event Stress

If you have been busy performing necessary tasks after the event, you may not react until you have less to do. A delayed reaction is common, but puts you on a different timetable from others. The suggestions below may be of help.

Care for yourself

- Take care of yourself. Try to eat regular, easy to digest meals. Avoid sugar and caffeine when mood swings are a problem. Monitor alcohol use.
- Re-establish exercise routine. Even a twenty minute walk will burn off some of the chemical byproducts of intense stress, which remain in your body and contribute to fatigue and tension.
- Rest by choosing from your repertoire of soothing, distracting activities
- Communicate about your experience in ways that feel comfortable. Writing an account of what happened and your reactions to it can be helpful.
- Do what you need to do to feel safe. Review security with a qualified colleague.
- Respect your feelings and ways of handling things and those of others. People cope differently.
- Check out how you are doing with a trusted person. Feedback as you begin to feel more like yourself can be helpful.
- Take part in available debriefing and other recovery activities.

Care for another exposed to a critical event

Use a common sense approach sometimes known as “Psychological First Aid”, to support the person’s coping and return of control in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic experience.

- Explain your position and role to the person you are supporting.
- Obtain medical attention if needed.
- Provide a sheltered opportunity for:
 - Food
 - Bathing
 - Resting
 - Communication with family/friends
- Provide protection from additional trauma of:
 - Intrusive questioning
 - Unwanted exposure to the public
 - Media attention
- Ascertain the person’s needs for
 - Company/companionship
 - Privacy
- Listen empathetically to what the person wants to tell you about the event

- Validate feelings and reactions (refer to What You May Experience above)
- Answer questions honestly
- Encourage re-establishment of personal routines
- Validate use of person's stress management repertoire
- Encourage one day at a time, small tasks, small goals approach

Reflect On Your Experience and Move On

Intense assignments are rarely “over” on departure from the site. In the aftermath some people experience an elevated mood that lasts for days or weeks. Others find the let-down sudden and may go through a grieving process and feel depressed. For some, flashbacks and intrusive images of disturbing events bring anxiety and continued stress, making it hard to let go and move on to new activities. People may dwell on their performance, wishing they had been more effective. They may want to share what happened with those close to them or may find this painful. If after a few weeks discomfort persists, and you are still not able to return to your normal routine contact Employee Consultation Service (ECS) (202-663-1815), which is free of charge to all DoS employees. If an appointment with ECS is not timely then seek assistance through your insurance carrier, or Mental Health Services in MED.

Many find that once the assignment is over, life gradually becomes normal and with normality comes a sense of new beginning born of having survived a challenging and dangerous experience. These people may be aware of new skills and competence acquired in coping with the disaster situation and feel satisfaction about this.

Most people eventually accept the notion that such powerful experiences have positive as well as negative aspects and that memories of those become part of one's life. They become accustomed to reactions surfacing from time to time in response to subsequent disturbing occurrences or on the anniversary of the disaster events. They accept what happened and their role in it, but focus on the future. They move on.